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ABSTRACT

A person's actions are caused by the interaction of external environmental forces and internal personal forces. Attributing actions to one or the other set of forces is a distorted view of cause. In therapy, attributing actions to external forces, particularly past events, relieves the client of guilt and makes sense out of his actions. Attributing actions to internal sources provides a means by which the client can change his actions by changing his ideas, interpretations of events and attitudes. Using both distortions of cause, this paper presents a method of therapy which emphasizes the client's responsibility for his actions, and develops the client as a causal agent in his own life. A six-point sequence of therapy tasks is outlined. This sequence extends from identifying undesirable actions to structuring programs of action changes beginning with small changes and systematically requiring larger changes. (Author/BW)

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PRAGMATIC CAUSAL DISTORTION IN COUNSELING[1]

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Many hours of conversation with persons who are puzzled, distressed, and demoralized about their inability to achieve personal fulfillment, and about their lack of balance in their relationships with others, have led me to believe that the most crucial problem in psychotherapy is the client's perception of the cause of his behavior. I have come to believe that what a person believes to be the source of his difficulties is pivotal as to whether he will gain benefit from the conversation. The purposes of this paper are to explore the problem of "the" cause of behavior in terms of the pragmatics of helping persons through conversation achieve change in the way they live and to sketch a method of treatment based on these considerations.

From a field theory point of view there is no single cause of behavior. The behavior of a person arises out of the interaction of environmental events acting on the person and the person's characteristics (Strong, 1973a, 1973b). Years ago Lewin symbolized this as B=f(P,E) where behavior (B) is seen as a function (f) of the environment (E) and the person (P) in interaction. As shown in Figure 1, we can depict a person's behavior at any time by a closed line, with arrows deriving from the center of the figure

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representing the influence of the person's internal characteristics and events and arrows originating outside the closed figure representing the influence of external environment events. The shape

Insert Table 1 about here

of the closed line depends upon the joint action of the internal and external influences. Without both, the figure, behavior, collapses. To identify one source of influence as "the" cause of behavior is to incorrectly focus on one factor and ignore many others. Hopefully, the decision to be inaccurate in description achieves some pragmatic result.

Another way to depict the multiplicity of cause of behavior is to see a person's action as one link in a chain of events, each event exerting causal control on the other events in the chain, as pictured in Figure 2. Behavior is the relationship among external

Insert Table 2 about here

events, internal events and action. Actions exert influence on external events, external events exert influence on internal events and internal events exert influence on actions and so on. If actions are the point of concern, the chain shows that actions result from the interaction of external and internal events and that assignment of cause to one or the other is a decision to distort the causal description.

If attributing cause to either external and internal factors is a distortion, then the crucial question is the pragmatic gain from distorting causality one way or the other. The external point of view has been endorsed by radical behaviorists beginning with the work of John B. Watson. The rationale for choosing to distort causality in this way is compelling from the point of view of an outside agent wishing to control another person. If a person's actions are a result of external circumstances, then an agent who can control the external circumstances can control the person's actions. This strategy has produced compelling evidence of its pragmatic effectiveness. Concepts like reinforcement, conditioning, shaping and extinction identify powerful influences on actions. The behavior of another can be controlled by gaining control of the other's environment. But the pragmatic question is whether counselors can obtain control of the environments of clients. Generally, while counselors exert some control during their conversations, they do not control much of the client's environment. Thus therapy as conversation would seem to gain only limited value from the external cause strategy. It is well to keep in mind the possibility of teaching the client to control his own environment. Also it is useful to keep in mind that attribution to external cause allows people to shed responsibility for their actions, thus relieving them of reactive guilt about their undesirable and undesired actions (Matross, 1974; Strong, 1970).

External attribution provides reasonable explanations for actions which, without explanations, seem crazy and incomprehensible (Matross, 1974).

The internal cause strategy or point of view holds the individual responsible for his actions. This strategy of accounting for behavior sees persons as active agents controlling their actions with their concepts, interpretations and ideas. The person is not a passive pawn of external forces, but is actively construing the meaning of events and willfully controlling his actions, and, through his actions, controlling external events. As an individual creates his actions, he bears the full responsibility and guilt for his wrongdoing and self-defeating actions. Unlike the external strategy, psychology has not amassed evidence supporting the pragmatic efficacy of internal causation, yet our experiences of living attest to the effectiveness of choice, decision, will, planning, strategies, determination, problemsolving, attitude change, concept development and insight. If we choose to see the individual as controlling and responsible, as determining his actions by his interpretations of external events, we can see that conversation with another about his interpretations, ideas and attitudes can help him change them and thus change his actions.

These considerations suggest that the essential problem of therapy is to lead the person to see his own thoughts and attitudes as responsible for his actions so that he can focus on changing his ideas, interpretations and attitudes and thus change his actions.

Helping a person to see himself as responsible for his actions seems to require analyzing the actions and presenting information such that he sees that actions other than the ones he emitted were possible given the circumstances, using methods described elsewhere (Matross, 1974; Strong, 1970; Strong & Matross, 1974). Having gained an internal cause attribution or perception, however, the ideas, interpretations and attitudes themselves seem to need to be accounted for. "How did I come to view things this way?" is a common question which must be answered. Exploring the person's past history always provides evidence of trauma, difficult situations and actions of others which can be seen as leading to the adoption of the problematic attitudes and interpretations. These events always occur at a young age when the client is unable to withstand external forces. Thus, internal causes themselves are seen as externally caused and the person is freed from guilt and responsibility for having the ideas and interpretations, yet the focus of the conversation remains on his responsibility for his actions and the task of changing the thoughts, attitudes and interpretations to more helpful ones. It is often helpful to emphasize that the person is no longer a helpless child, a victim of circumstances, but is now a strong adult able to withstand the threats he perceives from the environment. Also the circumstances themselves have changed, but the person has not changed his thoughts and perceptions in line with the changed circumstances.

The sequence of therapy tasks I have come to understand is the following:

1. Identify the undesired and undesirable actions;
2. Identify the external events related to the undesirable actions;
3. Identify historical factors which can account for having the interpretations of events now responsible for the current actions;
4. Present the idea of internal causation and show how the person's actions are not necessary consequences of the external events;
5. Disprove the troublesome interpretations and develop better, more realistic interpretations of events and attitudes;
6. Structure programs of action changes beginning with small changes and systematically requiring larger changes.

These steps are not unidirectional as progress in therapy requires working back and forth such that the program evolves cyclically. In the process of therapy a client often begins without a clear understanding of what his problematic actions are and without awareness of the circumstances related to the actions. Rogerian methods of reflecting feelings are very helpful in opening the client to his emotional turmoils and helping him to deeply explore his reactions, the circumstances of his reactions, related historical memories, and attitudes and interpretations related to his reactions. Getting

into the client's frame of reference is indispensible and mobilizes the client's resources to begin unfolding, analyzing and understanding what is happening to him. Accurately describing the client's feelings and actions leads the client inevitably to search for why he reacts in this way. At this point the client can be helped to shed his feelings of guilt about his actions and be relieved of the unintelligibility of his current state by attributing his current actions to learnings from the past. Concepts of external historical cause are presented emphasizing his past need to learn to get along with the difficult circumstances that he experienced in his upbringing.

Focusing on the influence of the past increases the client's feelings of helplessness to change. Next, the client needs to be shown that while he cannot help but to have learned to think and interpret events as he does, he is willfully maintaining his undesirable actions by choosing to continue to interpret external events as if he was still a helpless child and to continue to see current conditions as being the same as when he was a helpless child. Often it is helpful to describe a bondage to past experiences held in by forces of evil. This provides a way of removing the conception of continued bondage to the past through prayer ministry. Forcibly pointing out that he could interpret events differently leads the client to see that he is now responsible for maintaining his own difficulties and that he must change his ways of thinking if he wishes to change his ways of acting.

It seems necessary to forcibly point out that there is no external solution to his problems, no outside source or intervention which will relieve him of his troubles. He is responsible for his actions and is responsible for changing his actions. He must be led to disprove his assumptions about the external world. He must be helped to develop different assumptions which entail different actions. I find the irrational ideas developed by Ellis (1962) and the Christian concepts of love, self-worth, caring, responsibility and self-control to be indispensible aids in this effort. Working always from the client's frame of reference, the therapist points out and contradicts the client's assumptions. As therapy progresses, the client begins to contradict his own assumptions. The client often begins by focusing on negative feelings and perceptions of the world and comes around to contradicting and refuting old interpretations. During this development the therapist must stay with the client, following and reflecting his thinking and feeling. It is important that the therapist increasingly follow rather than lead as the change in thinking must be constructed by the client for his own use. Concurrently, small assignments of responsible actions are worked out, perhaps beginning with eating properly or doing small responsible tasks such as writing a letter. It is important that the initial assignment is strictly delimited, that the client feels responsible for doing the assignment and to avoid doing more than the assignment. Self-control entails carrying through an activity and avoiding other activities.

The conversation continues to cycle through all these steps until the client has gained reasonable control of feelings and actions and lives each day in a responsible way. The process inevitably involves backward steps as well as forward steps. The client must be helped to absolve his guilt about backward steps and helped to concentrate on learning from the reverses to avoid their repetition in the future. The process is very much a rational emotive problem-solving task with the client learning self-control and responsibility and to view himself as an active causal agent in his own life.

The process of therapy through conversation makes purposive use of both external and internal attributions of cause. Both distortions of cause serve pragmatic ends. External attribution frees the client from the burden of the past and its guilt and makes sense of current problems. Internal attribution focuses on current causes of current actions and provides tools for fighting the battle of taking control and changing actions to develop a more fulfilling life. Problems are seen as due to attitudes and interpretations the client continues to use and which can be and must be willfully changed. The client is the active agent in achieving his own change. It is doubtful that therapeutic change is possible through conversation without mobilizing the client as the agent of change. Persons who cannot assume the responsibility and burden of changing themselves due to age or degree of disturbance probably cannot be helped through therapeutic conversation.

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Reference Notes

1. An earlier form of this paper was presented to the counseling course in the Department of Education, University of Keele (England) while the author was on sabbatical leave from the University of Minnesota and a Fulbright Fellow, University of Aston in Birmingham, Birmingham, England, 1973-74.

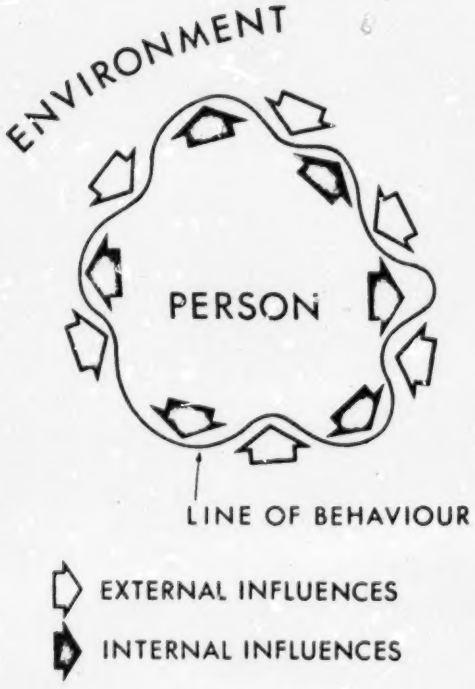

Figure 1: Line of behaviour as the joint function of external and internal influences

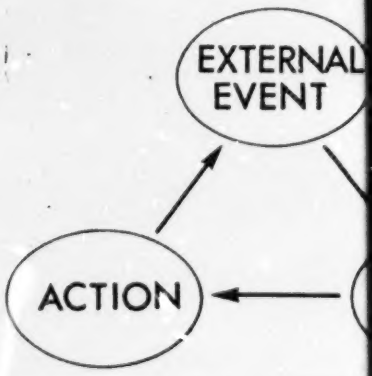

Figure 2: Causal chain of the events of beh

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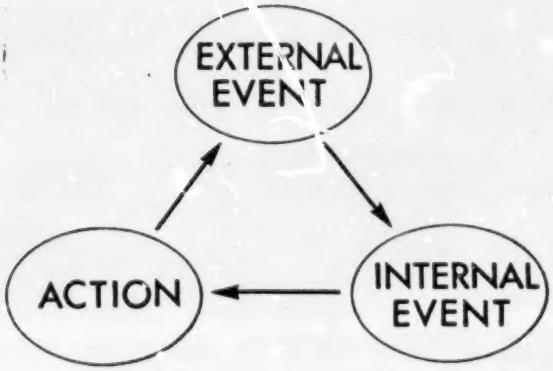

Figure 2: Causal chain of the events of behaviour